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AUTHOR Sanacore, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

Supporting efforts that promote the lifetime habit of reading professional literature should be a priority of administrators and teachers. Initiating teacher-led workshops, encouraging opportunities for collaboration, and providing time for working together are a few positive steps that complement conventional approaches to professional development. Workshop leaders can be especially supportive by helping participants apply a variety of criteria to specific articles from professional journals: readability, treatment, special features, scope, authority, and authenticity. Opportunities to discuss research findings and their application throughout the school year include setting aside time at faculty meetings to discuss professional literature, and involving teachers in the selection of professional materials that they will use. Ways to provide time for reading and collaborating include (1) scheduling teachers who are involved with a new curriculum for the same daily lunch period followed by a common preparation period; (2) organizing 2-hour staff development meetings biweekly, or providing 3 to 5 days each year for meetings; (3) using college interns to cover content area classes while teachers are engaging in collaborative efforts; and (4) using electronic mail to communicate with others, sharing ideas, and seeking help. Principals themselves should be readers of journals, monographs, and books, and should share pertinent findings with the staff. (RS)

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Promoting Lifetime Professional Literacy

Dr. Joseph Sanacore

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No one would argue against the importance of growing and developing as professional educators. Taking graduate courses, attending professional conferences, and participating in traditional workshops are the typical ways of keeping abreast of professional trends. Although these approaches have merit, they suggest that educators are extrinsically motivated and that they can grow only when stimulated by sources, such as professors, keynote speakers, and visiting staff development leaders. A necessary complement to these sources is the reading of professional literature. This process stresses intrinsic motivation and is directed toward lifetime professional growth. It also is based on the belief that administrators, supervisors, and teachers have interest in and ability to be independent individuals who read educational literature and apply pertinent findings to the classroom.

Encouraging lifetime professional literacy

Although reading journal articles and research reports does not guarantee effectiveness in the classroom, it does give us a more substantive base for better decision-making. For example, we realize a variety of alternatives for solving problems, and we become more reflective when carrying out innovations. Thus, our decisions and actions are more likely to have value and to be sustained.

How, then, can we develop this knowledge-driven approach?

In the February 1992 Journal of Reading, Sid Womack and B.J. Chandler discuss the results of a study conducted at the Dardanelle (Arkansas) Public Schools. The researchers surveyed elementary, middle, and high school teachers' reading habits and factors related to them. Specifically, the survey consisted of four parts: reading habits, enhancers of professional reading, detractors from professional reading that are inherent to the material, and detractors from professional reading that are external to the material. Although the sample of teachers surveyed was small, the results and implications can have practical value for schools.

Of special importance is the role of administrators in supporting teachers' desire to grow and develop through professional reading. The general scenario concerns administrators who are interested in current research and are involved in such practices as citing research findings at faculty meetings, individual conferences, or other settings; involving teachers in the selection of journals, monographs, and books; and making resources easily accessible (i.e., in the teachers' lounge).

As teachers and administrators, we can cooperatively move in this direction by planning innovative teacher-led workshops that nurture the lifetime habit of reading professional literature. A committee of volunteers could devise a needs assessment instrument or could modify the survey developed

by Womack and Chandler. After surveying the staff, the committee reviews the findings and considers staff development goals, workshop activities, assessment techniques, and individuals to serve as teacher leaders.

For example, the findings might reveal a number of needs, such as locating and reading journal articles that clearly relate important ideas to classroom practice and finding and reviewing research articles that clearly present valuable information. These needs are then translated into goals: (1) The workshop participants will be exposed to pragmatically written articles that have transfer value for the classroom. (2) The participants will be exposed to research articles that they can understand.

Afterward, volunteers from the faculty who have considerable experience with pragmatic and research articles can serve as workshop leaders, involving the participants in presentations, demonstrations, and discussions concerning the established goals. These activities are especially worthwhile when they are linked to practitioner journals (e.g., Educational Leadership, English Journal, Journal of Reading, Language Arts, and The Reading Teacher) and to research journals (e.g., Reading Research Quarterly and Research in the Teaching of English). Regrettably, during my 25 years of teaching graduate courses, I have found that novice and experienced teachers are sometimes insecure about their understanding and application of certain concepts and findings from the professional literature. These teachers also are uncomfortable about asking for guidance in using the literature effectively. Thus, an important workshop activity

is to facilitate the reading of these journals, and the workshop leaders can be especially supportive by helping the participants apply a variety of criteria to specific articles. These criteria include:

- Readability. Opportunities should abound for immersion in understandable articles. When unnecessary jargon is encountered, however, individuals benefit from the experience of inferring or speculating about the intended meaning. Also of value is an increased awareness of each article's intended audience, for example, classroom teacher, university researcher, graduate student, etc. Fortunately, readability is not as much an issue today as it was a decade ago because many editors of practitioner journals require authors to write in a conversational style. Even today's research-oriented journals contain less jargon.
- Treatment. Similar to readability is treatment. With exposure to different articles, individuals gain insights about how authors treat ideas. A useful activity is to choose a theme in which the participants are interested, such as reading-writing connections, and to select theoretical, practical, and research articles concerning the theme. As individuals compare the different ways in which the theme is treated, they are more likely to better understand and appreciate the varied perspectives.
- Special features. Often, articles contain tables, figures, illustrations, or other graphics. Those attending the workshops need guidance in determining if the special features are necessary and if the information within them is presented

clearly. For research articles, the participants probably will benefit from an awareness of how t-tests, f-values, and z-scores are arranged.

- Scope. Sometimes, the scope of an article is either too broad or too limited for its intended purposes, respectively giving the reader the impression that the article should have been a book or should have been expanded to include more important information. One way of deciding on the appropriateness of the scope is to read the author's introduction which usually includes his/her intent in the form of a thesis statement or a purpose. After completing the article, the workshop participants can compare its contents with other articles concerning the same topic.
- Authority. Being well-known in the language arts field does not guarantee authority with specific articles. It suggests, however, that the author is committed to certain aspects of the field (e.g., prior knowledge activation, metacognitive efforts, or voluntary reading strategies) and is sufficiently respected to have a volume of related work published. Beyond an author's favorable reputation, individuals need to be reminded that the authority of an article or a book may be demonstrated through an extensive, relevant bibliography.
- Authenticity. Most of the professional literature does not represent original contributions, but certain articles generate unique perspectives or creative ways of implementing valuable ideas. As the workshop participants read and discuss these worthwhile articles, they should focus on the accuracy of the

ideas presented, the degree to which subtle biases and emotional overtones are prevalent, and the extent to which the articles represent innovative contributions.

If we support workshop activities such as these, we increase the chances of helping teachers use the professional literature effectively. As teachers develop facility with the literature and come to realize the credibility of certain articles, monographs, and books, they are more apt to develop the lifetime habit of using these sources.

The value of these efforts, however, should be determined through evaluation. After reviewing the staff development goals and related activities, the teacher leaders and participants can cooperatively agree on specific ways of demonstrating what was actually learned. For example, portfolios may be used to highlight both individual and group accomplishments. Individuals could develop lesson plans showing insights gained from journal articles and their practical application to classroom instruction. Likewise, small groups of 2 or 3 teachers could design cooperative research projects showing solid interpretations of research articles and their use in classroom settings. Sharing these outcomes reaffirms the participants' increased effectiveness in reading the professional literature and in developing approaches to applying some of its ideas. As important, the participants reinforce their commitment to growing as a community of lifelong learners.

More collaboration is needed

These teacher-led, staff development efforts can be especially helpful in developing professional lifetime learners because they represent a familiar inservice format and therefore provide educators with a secure foundation for continuing to grow independently. This thrust toward independent growth, however, needs additional support during the school year. Thus, as administrators and teachers, we should encourage more opportunities to discuss research findings and their application to the classroom.

Recently, a middle school faculty completed a series of workshops concerning the reading of professional materials. The building principal, who believed in the importance of a knowledge-driven faculty, wanted to continue the teachers' impetus for professional growth. She allotted a half-hour of each monthly faculty meeting for discussing professional literature, and she focused on topics that the teachers felt were important.

For example, the faculty completed a survey related to instructional concerns, and the results highlighted the following five areas: (1) using portfolio assessment as a complement to other assessment approaches, (2) developing thematic units, (3) providing mainstreamed learners with effective instructional strategies, (4) organizing classroom activities through flexible intra-class grouping patterns, and (5) teaching reading and writing across the curriculum.

Before the faculty meetings, the principal and a group of teacher volunteers cooperatively chose topics that were highlighted in the results of the survey. Then, they pursued journal articles and research reports concerning the topics. Fortunately, the school library and a local university library provided the necessary resources. Afterward, the principal duplicated these resources and distributed them to the faculty several weeks before each monthly meeting. This approach helped the teachers to be better prepared for engaging in productive discussions. (Some of the topics required at least 2 or 3 meetings for adequate discussion.) At every faculty meeting, the principal motivated teachers to talk about their successes and failures when applying ideas from the professional literature. She also encouraged teachers to informally observe one another's approaches to using the literature in the classroom, and she stressed the importance of providing mutual feedback. Thus far, the teachers have responded positively to these activities.

In addition to this faculty-meeting approach, other collaborative efforts are needed to sustain teachers' interest in reading journals, books, and other important sources. A credible way of demonstrating support is to involve teachers in the selection of professional materials that they will use. Social studies teachers may be interested in such journals as Social Education and The Social Studies, while mathematics teachers may prefer The Arithmetic Teacher and The Mathematics Teacher. In addition, generalist journals (e.g., The Clearing

House, The High School Journal, and Phi Delta Kappan) provide broad perspectives on important issues and therefore complement the growing repertoire of content area faculty. When teachers and administrators cooperatively select materials, they develop a sense of ownership as they increase the probability of actually using the materials.

We can support this probability by placing the literature in an easily accessible location. Since the faculty lounge is visited often by teachers, it is a sensible place for displaying a variety of resources. For staff members who prefer a quiet environment, the preparation room or the school library are practical options. In all these locations, the staff is more apt to read the professional materials if they are made visible, for example, placed on an easel near the entrance of the locations. Another way of stimulating teachers' interest in the professional literature is for the building principal to cite pertinent research findings and then to indicate where related materials are located. Finally, busy teachers need reminders of when current resources arrive, and the school library/media specialist can accommodate this need by cataloguing the resources and providing updated print-outs to the staff. These comprehensive efforts send a message to the entire faculty that using professional materials is a major activity that is valued highly.

Providing time for reading and collaborating

As teachers demonstrate appreciation for the literature and its impact on classroom practice, they still benefit from support in continuing this important habit throughout their careers. In the September 1993 issue of Educational Leadership, Mary Anne Raywid discusses the results of her survey concerning how schools are providing time for collaboration. Some of her findings can be adapted for promoting the lifetime habit of using professional literature. For example,

- Teachers who are involved with a new curriculum can be scheduled for the same daily lunch period, followed by a common preparation period. This arrangement gives the teachers an uninterrupted block of time for reading and discussing journals and books.
- Three to 5 days each year may be organized for staff development meetings, or this time could be rescheduled to permit 13 two-hour sessions. Another variation is to offer biweekly two-hour sessions throughout the school year. Thus, the staff has sufficient opportunities for substantive, ongoing collaboration.
- Students can volunteer for community service activities during an afternoon each week. As the volunteers provide a variety of services, such as helping in a teenage treatment center, some of the teachers are free to reflect on professional materials and their relationship to classroom instruction.

If administrators and supervisors fill in as substitute teachers, more faculty members are able to join the collaborative sessions. Not surprisingly, students, community, and faculty are enriched by this arrangement.

Complementing these suggestions are the findings of Gary Watts and Shari Castle (Phi Delta Kappan, December 1993). These researchers surveyed schools involved in restructuring efforts to determine how they address the issue of time. Interestingly, some of the strategies and options used by the schools can be modified to accommodate the need for considering professional literature. These modifications include:

- A school can join a local college of education in a project involving college interns. The interns could be used to cover content area classes while the teachers are free to engage in collaborative efforts.
- Restructuring the daily schedule is a beneficial strategy, and a feasible example is when student time is added on 4 days with early release time provided on the fifth day. This "banking" of time gives teachers continuous opportunities for discussing pertinent resources and their impact on classroom practice. Such an approach, however, requires the formal support of all stakeholders, including the board of education, parents, administrators, teachers, and students. In addition, problems related to bus schedules and other practical matters must be dealt with effectively.
- Teachers with a computer in their classrooms have the potential for enjoying the benefits of E-mail capabilities.

Thus, they increase their facility in using professional literature while communicating with others, sharing ideas, and seeking help. This strategy certainly represents an efficient use of school time.

Beyond these recommendations, we should give more opportunities for reading and talking about important resources. Study groups can support this thrust because they are grass-roots oriented, they meet at flexible times and places convenient for the members, they stress sharing among colleagues, and they stimulate the reading and application of ideas from pertinent resources. More information about study groups can be found in my column "Using Study Groups to Create a Professional Community" (JR, September 1993).

These and other considerations help teachers not only to become independent but also to appreciate the collective support of peers. Schools that provide time for collaboration benefit profoundly with informed, knowledge-driven teachers who make better instructional decisions.

Maintaining the perspective

Supporting efforts that promote the lifetime habit of reading professional literature should be a priority of administrators and teachers. Initiating teacher-led workshops, encouraging opportunities for collaboration, and providing time for working together are a few positive steps that complement conventional approaches to professional development. These

efforts help educators gain a sense of independent and collective growth as they pursue substantive decision-making throughout the school year. Within this context, administrators can be especially effective in demonstrating a deep concern for teachers' continued growth. Specifically, principals should, themselves, be readers of journals, monographs, and books and should share pertinent findings with the staff. In addition, involving teachers in the selection of resources and making the resources easily accessible show a genuine concern for the faculty's career development. Administrators who move in this direction will enjoy a profound legacy of helping teachers and their students to be updated, productive, and prepared for the 21st century.